Discourse and Domination: A Foucauldian reading of Lolita

Lolita by Vladimir Nabokov was first published in 1955 by Olympia Press, a small French publisher known for “forbidden” or experimental books. In 1956–1957 it was banned in England, Argentina, and New Zealand, and Nabokov struggled to find a publisher because of the taboo subject. Public reaction to *Lolita* was divided: some called it immoral trash, while others saw it as a masterpiece of style. Later, in 1962, Stanley Kubrick released the first film adaptation. But to avoid censorship, the movie softened many elements of the book. Today, *Lolita* is widely regarded as one of the greatest novels of the 20th century.

The novel tells the story of Humbert Humbert, a middle-aged European intellectual who becomes obsessed with Dolores Haze, a 12-year-old American girl he nicknames “Lolita.” *Lolita* is often misunderstood today, partly because Nabokov’s narrative style explores perception and imagination, distorting reality. One crucial point is that *Lolita* is not a love story. It is about obsession, power, and manipulation. Nabokov uses Humbert Humbert to seduce readers with beautiful words, hiding the abuse beneath lyrical prose. Humbert does not truly love Dolores as a person; he transforms her into his fantasy “Lolita.”

This dynamic echoes Michel Foucault’s theories of power, particularly those in *The History of Sexuality*. Nabokov shows how discourse; language, categories, and knowledge can transform abuse into something that appears normal or even desirable. Humbert’s invention of the term “nymphet” is a Foucauldian example of power/knowledge at work. By creating this category, Humbert reframes Dolores not as a victim but as a willing participant. He uses his education and eloquence to justify his actions, turning a child into a fantasy object.

Foucault argues that knowledge is never neutral; it is always tied to power. Just as psychiatry decides what counts as “madness” and law defines what counts as “crime,” discourse produces categories: “homosexual,” “hysterical woman,” or “pervert” that shape how people understand themselves. Power, for Foucault, is not simply something one person possesses. It flows through relationships, institutions, and language, shaping what society believes is “normal” or “deviant.”

In *Discipline and Punish* (1975), Foucault shows how modern power works by making people internalize control. Nabokov portrays Dolores as if she were a prisoner in Humbert’s personal panopticon, showing how he enforces control through constant surveillance and restriction. Humbert’s narration itself is a form of discourse that presents abuse as “love.” What makes Humbert dangerous in *Lolita* is not only his desire or his actions, but his ability to distort reality with language turning exploitation into something that seems natural or even beautiful.

As Foucault famously wrote, “Power is everywhere, not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere.” This idea is reflected in Humbert Humbert’s behavior in Lolita: his control over Dolores operates through surveillance, manipulation, and the shaping of her choices, showing how power functions through subtle constraints rather than direct coercion. Beyond its controversy, Lolita can be read through Foucault’s theories of power, revealing how domination is exercised not only through violence but also through discourse, as knowledge and language normalize control and abuse. In this light, Nabokov’s novel becomes a powerful illustration of Foucault’s insight that power is not simply top-down, like a king ruling over subjects, but embedded in everyday practices and relationships, shaping our perceptions of what is acceptable.